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ABSTRACT

This paper recommends that rural education researchers adopt an ecological approach that acknowledges both family and community influences on child development and school outcomes. Although rural researchers have generated useful information about children, few studies have provided a full portrayal of rural children's lives. A fundamental principle of ecological research is a focus on the interrelationships of systems (mesosystems) in which the child develops. Connections between the child, the child's family, and other aspects of the child's life (school, peer group, recreational activities) are multiple and dense in rural communities. Rural researchers need to identify how these systems interact through case studies, time diaries, and naturalistic observations and interviews. Social capital is a term characterizing the role that formal and informal communities play in child development. Although researchers acknowledge the existence of social capital in rural communities, the specific relationships among social capital, rural children, and the corresponding role of the rural community as an ecological factor have yet to be investigated. An ecological approach could identify community characteristics that hinder or enhance child development. For example, one researcher has proposed that areas that are more rural are less socially healthy for children's development. Case studies of the mesosystems of rural children in communities of varying size might answer the question of when small is good and when it is too little. Ecological studies that analyze children's developing sense of place and the role of play in children's development can focus on other mesosystems. An ecological approach, with its special sensitivity to the setting in which children develop, can provide a rich portrayal of rural children's lives and recognize uniquely rural qualities. (Contains 16 references.) (LP)

Using Human Ecological Approaches to Study Rural Childhood

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Using Human Ecological Approaches to Study Rural Children's Development

Rural children do not arrive at school innocent of any prior experiences, nor do they exist outside of school in a state of suspended animation. Instead, they bring to the school ongoing family and community lives which construct their school experience in a multitude of ways. This interaction means that rural education researchers must also be aware of the non-institutional lives of the children whom they study, recognizing that the family and community influences which accompany children to school contribute mightily to whatever school outcomes are being measured. Given this need for better information about the lives of rural children, it may be reassuring to assume that the increasingly popular use of ecological approaches to the study of human development will provide useful answers. Such a conceptual framework implies that the context in which children develop will receive due and thoughtful appreciation, that researchers will take seriously how growing up in a rural community may create an alternative set of circumstances which interact with the emerging human in distinctive ways.

Disappointingly, ecological studies are not abundant, at least as far as children are concerned. Although promising and often ingenious studies have resulted from this relatively recent emphasis on the context of human development, too often they focus neither on "rural" nor on "children;" a spotlight on rural children jointly is a relative rarity. Further, the promise of this approach to consider thoroughly how "the conditions under which human beings live have a powerful effect on how they develop" (Bronfenbrenner, 1988, p. x) often emerges onesidedly. Simply siting a study in a rural setting does not necessarily produce a piece of

research attuned to rural environments; in other words, one can choose a rural community or rural children as subjects of study but this does not guarantee that any uniquely rural insights will be captured. Nor does lavishly describing the environment tell us much about how development emerges in those settings. " 'In place of too much research on development 'out of context,' we now have a surfeit of studies on 'context without development' " (Bronfenbrenner, 1988, p. xvii). Getting it right - how the rural setting and children's development interact - is a very challenging task for the researcher. The paucity of studies, especially studies which involve rural children in non-institutional settings, is perhaps understandable.

The absence of rural children and their ecology is doubly ironic given that children often lie at the heart of rural self-definition. Janet Fitchen (1991) noted that rural citizens frequently described their communities as a place of and for families: a healthy family atmosphere and consequently a good place to raise children were common attributions, as was the notion of the community as "one big family" where people know one another and families comprise the basic social order. Popular romantic notions of rural childhood pervade the media, and contemporary demographic data indicate that much of the population flow back into rural America is prompted by the belief that it is "a good place to raise kids." Despite such optimistic assumptions, we have very little solid information about how the child and the rural environment interact to create a potentially distinctive pattern of development. Although rural education researchers have been pioneers in assembling some intriguing and useful pieces of information about children, the task of constructing a full portrayal of rural children's lives remains. An ecological framework can contribute valuably to that portrayal but only if

researchers distinguish it from broad description and ask some very specific questions. What follows are some potential applications of human ecology to the study of rural children and some questions that still need asking.

First, fundamental to an ecological approach is a centering on the interrelationships of settings in which the human develops. Consequently, "what is crucial to an ecological approach as distinct from other contextually sensitive approaches is the primary place accorded to the interactions between systems" (Glossop, 1988, p. 6). In other words, an ecologically valid perspective demands that the emphasis should lie in how the systems in which the child develops interact, removing the researcher from child development's traditional favorite focus - typically the mother-child system - to a broader level.

Rural researchers have led the way in underscoring the value of broader level approaches, particularly in their insistence that the rural community as a whole plays a role in children's development. They have teased out characteristics of rural schools which may differentially impact children's development, characteristics often rooted in interrelationships among settings, notably community embeddedness. Nevertheless, much of the research in child development remains attuned to smaller settings (e.g., family, child care or school classroom) rather than examining the larger community in which children develop (Hatch, 1995). Bronfenbrenner, Moen & Gabarino (1984) note that "the amount of empirical work in this area is still meager. Part of the difficulty in approaching this task stems from the fact that such terms as 'community' or 'neighborhood' have not as yet been perceived as important referents by the gatekeepers of the field of child development" (p. 283).

Thus, an ecological approach to human development can assist in concentrating the researcher's attention on the interaction (rather than just the observed existence) of systems in the child's life. More significantly for the study of rural children, however, is its conceptualization of those systems for pragmatic research. Here, Bronfenbrenner's notion of the mesosystem is a particularly fruitful one for the rural researcher. He characterized this as the interrelationship between 2 or more settings in which the child participates, suggesting that interconnections between settings (for example, between home, school, day care, and community) are potentially powerful variables affecting children's development. This is precisely the same argument that rural researchers have attempted to make: that connections between the child, the child's family, and other players in the child's life (school, peer group, recreational activities, etc.) are multiple and dense in rural communities. Intuitively, we know that there is something unique about the mesosystem in rural life that enhances development for children, but we have not richly and empirically documented these mesosytem interactions. Both qualitatively and quantitatively, rural researchers need to identify plainly how this works; utilizing case studies, time diaries, naturalistic observations and interviews, we can begin to single out the connections across these settings.

What might researchers look for in the rural child's mesosystem? Probably most of us suspect that interactions are likely to be dense, multigenerational, limited in number, and perhaps somewhat stable (familiar). Seeing your teacher at the grocery store while shopping with your father, being stopped on the street by a neighbor who mentions the prize you won at school, having a playmate whose mother is also your Sunday School teacher are all examples of the types of interactions which rural children might customarily experience. This is

consistent with ecological psychologists' findings that children from small towns are more familiar with people and places in their communities, particularly adults outside of their families (Schoggen, 1989, pp. 226-233), thus suggesting that rural children's interactions may indeed be characterized as dense and multigenerational. Multigenerational interactions, considered to be a healthy indicator of human development by many observers (Konner, 1991, pp. 312-318), are virtually unaddressed in research on American children. Naturalistic observations of rural children's supposed greater engagement with adults in their communities would be a welcome addition to the literature, as would any further empirical data on the degree of interrelationships across settings. Overall, interactions which encompass frequency, stability and reciprocity are key to child development; Bronfenbrenner labelled their absence as a cause for grave concern, arguing that "instability over time in the environments of everyday life" constitutes a "major threat" to healthy child development (1993, p. 4).

Quite similarly, Coleman (1987) used the term social capital to conceptualize the crucial role that formal and informal communities play in child development. Although much of his work applied primarily to family and school networks, it appears to be equally applicable to communities broadly and is especially worthy of testing on that level. Pessimistically, Coleman asserted that because "...strong communities are much less often present now than in the past, and promise to be even less present in the future, ...we confront a declining quantity of human capital embodied in each successive generation" (1988, p. S118). Although rural researchers have readily claimed the existence of social capital in rural communities, and again intuitively it makes sense, the specific relationships among social capital, rural children and

the corresponding role of the rural community as an ecological factor in children's development awaits empirical testing and refinement.

Of course, another value to utilizing human ecological approaches lies in forcing researchers to let go of some of their own nostalgic assumptions about childhood, especially cherished beliefs about the presence of social capital. By examining from the child's perspective the experience of growing up in rural communities, we may find that none of these presumed conditions exist. Louise Chawla's study (1994) of growing up in rural Kentucky compared present-day and previous generations. Drawing upon oral histories, archival research and community studies by fourth graders as methods, she found that contemporary rural children experienced more private than public life, less territorial freedom and fewer behavior settings than did older members of the community. Bartlett's (1991) study of "Nostalgia and Reality in Neighborhood Life" in rural Vermont found children less likely to form and play in peer groups, less likely to roam or to interact with their rich physical environment, more privatized and less connected to their neighborhood. In summary, these rural children may be far more similar to urban children than rural nostalgicists envision.

We may learn equally unpalatable facts about the community as a whole by employing an ecological approach. Arguing that there is a "social cost of space," Wilkinson maintained that the limited number of contacts numerically available in a rural setting is "a deficit and not a strength..." (p. 62). Such isolation artificially intensifies the primacy of family relationships and presumably diminishes the opportunity for children to develop flexible, adaptive capabilities afforded by interacting with a wide range of social contacts. "Adaptive capacity is impaired by lack of diversity in community structures, and local wellbeing is depressed as a

consequence" (Wilkinson, 1991, p. 62). His argument implies that the more rural the area, the less socially healthy it may be for children's development. Case studies of the mesosystem of rural children in communities of varying populations might help answer this question of when small is good and when it is too little. It certainly parallels the work of researchers examining size and scale in schools, suggesting they may need to analyze the lower ranges more critically.

Also of particular interest to rural researchers will be studies by place attachment theorists who often employ multiple methods to analyze children's developing sense of place. Frequently, a "sense of place" represents an important constellation of feeling and identity among rural residents; researchers often allude to it, and suggest that schools should be more receptive to "place-conscious curriculum," but tracing how children develop this shared feeling has proven elusive. Certainly, for rural children "mesosystem" has some very concrete applications often rooted in geography and physical environment as well as human interaction. Rural children may indeed have a stronger sense of place rooted in direct experience with the natural world around them, an expectation traditionally associated with rural childhood. Studies of how children, peers, familial and non-familial adults and local institutions interconnect around the child's use of the physical environment may tell us a great deal about the child's own growth and our shared ecological future as well. Some researchers maintain that only rural children may experience the conditions essential to developing an environmental ethic so necessary for the world's wellbeing. In terms of cognitive development, they argue that concern for the environment cannot be directly taught to children, who instead require "opportunities for first-hand, intimate contact with nature..." (Chawla & Hart, 1995, p. 155)

as a prerequisite. Reviewing a study of "dedicated conservationists," they found "two consistent influences: many free hours spent outdoors in woods and fields and with animals, and at least one adult model who taught attentive respect for wild things" (Chawla & Hart, 1995, p. 155). Do rural American children still experience this direct interaction, supported by adults? Some other observers speculate that "only in the poorer parts of rural America do children still grow up with nature woven into the texture of their lives" (Tuan, 1978, p. 27).

This leads us into children's play, which is the last frontier for many researchers, even those of an ecological bent. Although play is intimately part of the child's development, and the habitats of play clearly significant, relatively few scholars have chosen it as a topic of investigation. Perhaps play exemplifies the boundary between childhood and adulthood, reminding us that "the difference between scholar and subject is not just cultural; it is also cognitive" (West & Petrik, 1992, p. 4). This cognitive gap reminds us of the weight Bronfenbrenner originally accorded to phenomenology, the crucial importance of capturing the developing person's perspective. Children present special challenges to the ecological researcher on both pragmatic and conceptual levels: bridging the cognitive gap, entering children's physical settings unobtrusively, participating sensibly in children's non-institutional activities and according children respect as equal contributors to the construction of knowledge exemplify some of these challenges. These difficulties perhaps explain why a solid record of ecological research with children has proven so elusive.

Nonetheless, this type of approach with its focus on the child's development in context fits consonantly with much past and present research in rural education. Its conceptualization of "mesosystem" and consequent insistence on observing interconnections between systems bear

special relevance for rural researchers, offering an avenue for pursuing notions that appear intuitively appealing. It puts the developing child at the center of attention rather than as an outcome variable; by insisting that the child occupy the central focus, human ecological approaches require that the researcher develop methods sensitive to capture that perspective, methods which have been utilized by rural education researchers. Finally, this approach's special sensitivity to the setting in which the child develops suggests that uniquely rural qualities will be honored rather than simply compared with urban. A more cogent application of this framework may respond to issues and concerns expressed today.

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